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## "He of the Trees"

### Nature, Environment, and Creole Religiosities in Caribbean Literature

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All misfortune comes from the cut trees, they have cut them down, even the calabash trees, even the trees of Ogou.

—Marie Chauvet, *Fonds des nègres*

IN HAITIAN VODOU, the *lwa*, or spirit known as Loco, the chief of Legba's escort, is known as "he of the trees." He governs the tree or temple centerpost that serves as channel for the *lwa*, the divine life forces of Vodou, to enter into communion with their human *serviteurs* through the phenomenon of possession. Loco and his consort, Ayizan, are, as Maya Deren describes them in *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, the moral parents of the race, the first *houngan* and *manbo* (priest and priestess of Vodou), whose chief responsibility is that of imparting to humans the knowledge of *konnesans* on which the future of the race depends. They are also Vodou's first healers, as it was Loco "who discovered how to draw their properties from the trees and to make the best herbal charms against disease" and Ayizan who protects against malevolent magic (Deren 148). Together they represent the belief in Vodou that spiritual maturity rests on the understanding of the necessary balance between cosmic forces and the natural world.

Loco and Ayizan, together with Osain, their orisha counterpart in Cuba's Regla de Ocha, and Palo Monte (the practices commonly known as Santería), offer a path to an ecocritical reading of the relationship between the Caribbean folk and nature, and of the representation of this relationship in Caribbean literature. Osain, the patron of *curanderos* (folk or herbalist healers), is the master of the healing secrets of plants, the deity of *el monte*—the Cuban forest or bush: "All the *ewe* [plants or herbs] is the property of Osain, and without enlisting his aid beforehand, it is not possible to do any work in Santería" (González-Wippler 55). Osain defines the parameters of the bond between man and his natural

environment—the most crucial relationship in African-derived religions—as Santería, like Vodou and Rastafarianism, is a religion that integrates human concerns with spiritual forces. It has been described as an "earth religion, a magico-religious system that has its roots in nature and natural forces . . . a system that seeks to find the divine in the most common, ordinary things . . . All that Santería wants to do is to embrace nature, but in so doing it embraces the soul of all things" (González-Wippler 4, 23).

My primary concern in this essay is to trace how some salient works of Caribbean literature have articulated the relationship between Caribbean peoples and their environment, as seen through the prism of African-derived Caribbean religiosities. It uses the figure of the *houngan*, the priest and healer, as the focus of an ecocritical reading of several examples of the twentieth-century Caribbean novel, such as Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of This World*, Marie Chauvet's *Fond des nègres*, and Mayra Montero's *In the Palm of Darkness*. My main focus in these readings is that of addressing the articulation of an environmentalist thought linked to religiosity in the Caribbean novel as revealed through the examination of the role of the *houngan* (or related figures) as protector of the balance between nature, the spirits, and man—as chief conservator, so to speak. A secondary concern is that of how these novels interpret the threat to the Caribbean environment posed by increased pollution and development as a menace to Creole religiosities themselves, whose connection to nature is transformed as landscapes change and the "trees" that are fundamental to Loco's role as healer disappear.

In the Caribbean region, the relationship between man and nature was determined early in postencounter history by the ecological trauma represented by the establishment of the sugar plantation. Pre-plantation Arawak culture—as described in Spanish chronicles and most vividly in Friar Ramón Pané's *Relación acerca de las antigüedades de los indios* (*An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians*, 1571)—was dependent on a simple economy of subsistence agriculture and fishing centered on "a harmonious relationship between religion, culture, politics, and patterns of work and exchange" (Paravisini-Gebert, "Caribbean Literature" 670). Pané's collection of Arawak myths and legends articulates poignantly the symbiotic relationship between man, nature, and the gods that was the foundation of pre-Columbian Caribbean cultures: man worked along with nature to produce the crops and claim the fish needed for the welfare of the community, and this labor was accepted as a pleasing offering by their principal deity, Yocahú, provider of yucca and fish.

Although devastated by warfare and the virgin soil epidemics that decimated the aboriginal population, the Arawak worldview survived the wreckage and environmental assault of European conquest and colonization to eventually lay the foundation for traditions of resistance that would serve as a counterworld to the economy of the plantation. In early colonial texts, such as Friar Bartolomé de las Casas's *Brevísima relación acerca de la destrucción de las Indias* (*A Brief Account of the Devastation of the Indies*, 1522), the Arawak native emerges as a noble savage living in harmony with the environment—the Indian as classic hero—an image to which Caribbean writers will return again and again in search of symbols of prequest, preslavery cultural wholeness. Las Casas's concern with the question of how to incorporate the Arawaks into the Spanish nation as subjects with rights and prerogatives—the central focus of both the *Brevísima* and his *Apologética historia sumaria* (*General Apologetic History*, 1575)—brought him to an early understanding of how, from its inception, Spanish expansion in the Caribbean region was dependent on the economic, political, and cultural exploitation of the native populations and new environments (Paravisini-Gebert, "Caribbean Literature" 671–72).

Throughout the Caribbean, this exploitative expansion found its most efficient form in the economy of the plantation. Caribbean societies, Eric Williams has argued, "were both cause and effect of the emergence of the market economy; an emergence which marked a change of such world historical magnitude, that we all are, without exception still 'enchanted' imprisoned, deformed and schizophrenic in its bewitched reality" (quoted in Wynter 95). This change was both demographic and ecological. Thousands of African slaves were brought to the new world with the sole aim of making it possible to produce a luxury crop for the international market in plantations that required the complete transformation of the Caribbean's tropical landscape. The Caribbean sugar plantation grew at the expense of the dense and moist tropical forests that needed to be cleared to make way for the new profitable crop. This rapid deforestation led to soil depletion, landslides, erosion, and climatic changes that included significant decreases in levels of moisture and rainfall (Grove 64–70). The resulting environmental degradation was exacerbated in many areas of the Caribbean by ungulate irruptions—the introduction of domestic grazing animals alien to the pre-encounter Caribbean environment—that transformed the cultural and social landscape. Together, these rapid environmental changes brought about an ecological revolution, "an abrupt and qualitative break with the process of environmental and social change that had developed in situ" (E. Melville 12).

Sylvia Wynter has argued, however, that despite the seemingly irrevocable consequences of this ecological revolution—despite the apparent victory of the forces of the plantation and the *emporium*—there remains a tension in Caribbean history and culture between the forces of the plantation and an equally powerful cultural and environmental drive to return to the plot system of subsistence agriculture—"the indigenous, autochthonous system"—that characterized the cultures of both the original Arawak and Carib inhabitants of the region and of the African slaves brought forcefully to provide labor in the plantations. She bases her theories on the work of Guatemalan novelist Miguel Angel Asturias, who defined this clash as one between "the indigenous peasant who accepts that corn should be sown only as food, and the *Creole* who sows it as a business, burning down forests of precious trees, impoverishing the earth in order to enrich himself" (Wynter 96). Wynter, in her turn, saw the plot system—which in the Caribbean was reinforced by the planters' practice of giving the slaves plot of lands on which to grow food to feed themselves—as "the focus of resistance to the market system and market values" (99). Holger Henke has argued, following Wynter, that these provision grounds—to be found most commonly on the edge of the remaining forests—became "the living proof to the enslaved African of wo/man's ability and vocation to live in natural harmony and in harmony with nature" (63). The plot system may thus be read—although this is a point that neither Wynter nor Henke develops—as the foundation of a specific approach to nature and environmental conservation in the Caribbean that would allow the return to a pre-encounter ecological balance.

Wynter contends that the articulation of this tension between plot and plantation—with its environmental implications—is at the core of the development of Caribbean literatures. Her reading of Victor Reid's *New Day* and Herbert De Lisser's *Revenge: A Tale of Old Jamaica*—tales that address the 1865 Morant Bay rebellion in Jamaica—underscores historical and textual anxieties that are closely tied to the environment and religion, and to the possibility of recovering the roots of history in the oral tradition of the plot-oriented folk. Reid's novel, in a pivotal scene centering on a Kumina ceremony, portrays Bogle, the rebellion's leader, as an ancestor-god who conveys the peasantry's desire for the recovery of their connection to the land; De Lisser, in his turn, as a defender of the colonial class, demonizes the peasantry's aspirations by embodying them in the figure of the "voodoo" priest as false revolutionary leader, both in *Revenge* and in his better-known novel *The White Witch of Rose Hall* (Paravisini-Gebert, "White Witch"). In both cases, however, the link between Creole religiosity

and the plot is manifest. Henke underscores this connection in his study of the provision grounds as places where “all elements of a free wo/man’s life came together in a condensed form,” especially those religious rites “abhorred by the Caribbean plantocracy” that played such an important function “for the stabilization of internal social order among the slave population” (63).

Wynter’s essay predates the development of ecocritical approaches to the reading of literature, but she nonetheless pinpoints the basic dichotomy that underlies pan-Caribbean approaches to writing about nature and environmental conservation: that the political, economic, racial, and religious elements associated with the development of the plantation economy (and the tourism that follows in its wake) will be most fundamentally at war with their counterparts on the side of the plot system of agriculture. It suggests an ecocritical stance that pits colonialism versus independence; an international market economy versus a locally driven subsistence economy; European culture versus Creole culture; the anthropocentrism of Christianity versus the man/nature symbiosis of autochthonous Caribbean and African-derived religious practices; the land cleared for either plantation or golf course versus the forest. Questions such as the role of the physical setting in the plot of a novel; the consistency of the values expressed in the text with ecological wisdom; how the metaphors of the land influence the way it is treated; how the text articulates the people’s relationship to the natural world, among others, have been addressed in the Caribbean from one or the other of the positions suggested by Wynter (Glotfelty, “Literary Studies” xix). Caribbean writing has always been deeply engaged with the landscape, with the creation of geographically rooted narratives where the environment takes a central role in determining the possible ideologies available to a character (Poirier 15–16).

Take, for example, the various characters in *Hamel, the Obeah Man*, a little-known two-volume work published in 1827 (see Paravisini-Gebert, “Colonial and Post-Colonial Gothic”). Set in Jamaica, the novel traces the career of Roland, a white preacher whose teachings about the equality of man and attempts to lead a slave rebellion (elements that place him on the side of the plot system) are corrupted by his underlying desire to forcibly marry the daughter of a local planter and side with the supporters of the plantation system. The novel’s unknown author, unambiguously pro-plantation, denounces Roland’s unnatural desire to overthrow the planters’ legitimate social order by turning him into a “villain of Gothic dimensions” whose “fevered mind twists increasingly towards violence as the tale progresses,” culminating in “nightmare desperation” (Lalla 10). A Eurocentric

narrative haunted by the then recent memory of the Haitian Revolution, the novel finds a somewhat implausible hero in the black Obeah man, Hamel, who is made to move from an early enthusiastic revolutionary fervor to the denunciation of the cause of revolutionary freedom. Hamel, a black man linked to his ancestral culture through the practice of Obeah, ultimately turns his back on “civilization” and sets out on a solitary journey to Guinea, leaving behind the plot/plantation dichotomy. In this ability to retreat to a mythical (and still forested) African homeland, he is luckier than his fellow characters, the “Gothic unnaturals” who must remain in the contradictory space between “loyal subject and vengeful rebel,” the tainted product of “the undisciplined sexual passions of their white fathers” and the “savage inheritance of their non-white mothers,” literally stranded between the plantation and the plot (Lorimer 681–84).

*Hamel, the Obeah Man* is of interest in our context because of the ways in which the text makes clear the almost deterministic connections between geography, race, class, and ideology in writing about the Caribbean, and because of the ways in which it equates ideology with specific religious practices and stances concerning the land and its forests. In the geographical space of Caribbean literature, where characters must choose allegiances to either the plot or the plantation or remain stranded in a contradictory, ambiguous no-man’s land, the religious leader emerges as the troubled articulator of environmental ideology. Roland, a white man and a Christian priest, is torn between his impulse to help the enslaved population regain its connection to the land and his will to wed the plantation heiress, and is consequently demonized. Hamel, an Obeah man and therefore the focus of the planters’ fears of slave insurrection, is made to disavow his “natural” allegiances to the plantation workers and their dream of a plot of land and flee to Guinea. They are both in a way defined by their relation to the land—to the plantation, the plot, or the mythical geography of the ultimate provision ground, Lan Guinée.

Hamel’s flight to Guinea allows the text’s anonymous author to sidestep the novel’s most problematic issue: that of the implausibility of making a practitioner of Obeah, by definition a subversive figure, the spokesman for the defense of the plantation system. The practice of Obeah, seen by British colonial authorities as a threat to the stability of the plantation and the health of colonial institutions, had been outlawed in most British Caribbean islands early in the eighteenth century, after being perceived as one of the few means of retaliation open to the slave population. Obeah men such as Hamel, moreover, were seen as potential leaders who could use their influence over the slaves to incite them into rebellion, as had

been the case in the Jamaican rebellion of 1760. Edward Long, as Alan Richardson underscores, had discussed the role of a “famous obeiah man or priest in the Tacky Rebellion in his *History of Jamaica* (1774), a work notorious for its virulent racism, and stated that among the ‘Coromantyns’ (slaves shipped from the Gold Coast) the ‘obeiah-men’ were the ‘chief oracles’ behind conspiracies and would bind the conspirators with the ‘fetish or oath’” (Long 2:451–52, 473).

The history of slave rebellions in the Caribbean can be read as the articulation of the tensions between plot and plantation that Wynter describes. Slave rebellions—like the establishment of maroon communities by runaway slaves that functioned as spaces to preserve cultural and religious practices—had as their goal the return to familiar patterns of interactions between the transplanted Africans and the land inhabited by the spirits. Like Obeah, the practices of Haitian Vodou—the array of practices that Michel Laguerre has called “the collective memory of the [African] slaves brought to the sugar plantations of Haiti” (3)—grew in intensity as the colony’s accelerated rate of production during the mid- to late eighteenth century redoubled the massive migration of thousands of men and women to a new and unfamiliar world marked by their brutal exploitation and early deaths in the plantations of Saint Domingue.

Like the Obeah-inspired rebellions in the British West Indies, the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) would be rooted in the commonality of religious and cultural practices centered on Vodou, and its beginnings would be marked by a pact between the revolutionary leaders and the Vodou *lwa* or spirits. The links between religion and the uprising were established early through the slaves’ belief in the powers of their legendary leader Makandal to predict the future and transform himself into various animals—attributes conferred by the *lwa*, or spirits, which served him well in his clandestine war against the French colonists. The connection between religion, the uprising, and the environment emerged out of Makandal’s identification with the forest and its vegetation, which yielded to him the secrets of the poisons that constituted his chief weapon against French planters. His reputation as a *houngan*, or Vodou priest, therefore, grew in proportion to the fear he instilled in the French settlers that his knowledge of the poisons, spells, and other subtle weapons he deployed against the white population had its source in magical powers linked to mysterious African practices and a supernatural symbiosis with the forest.

Makandal’s link to the forest and the *lwa* is central to Alejo Carpentier’s fictionalized rendition of the history of the Haitian Revolution, *The Kingdom of This World* (1949), where he is portrayed as an *houngan* of the

Rada rite, the Lord of Poison, “invested with superhuman powers as the result of his possession by the major gods” (Kingdom 36). He is simultaneously endowed with “the supreme authority by the Rulers of the Other Shore” to exterminate the whites and create a great empire of free blacks in Saint Domingue and with the power of Loco and Osain, having mastered the herbs and fungi of the forest—“the secret life of strange species given to disguise, confusion, and camouflage, protectors of the little armored beings that avoid the pathways of the ants” (23). In this portrayal, knowledge of the powers hidden in nature is bestowed on Makandal as a sign of his blessing by the gods of Africa who have followed those who serve them across the waters to a new land.

Carpentier’s reading of this pivotal moment in Caribbean history is complex and ultimately flawed (see Paravisini-Gebert, “Haitian Revolution”). His reading of the ecological implications of French colonialism and of the failure of the environmental project behind the Haitian Revolution, however, is of profound interest in our context. Carpentier’s descriptions of the Haitian landscape in *The Kingdom of This World* underscore the ecological wreckage the plantation and the Revolution have left in their wake:

But around the turn in the road, plants and trees seemed to have dried up, to have become skeletons of plants and trees in earth which was no longer red and glossy, but had taken on the look of dust in a cellar. There were no bright cemeteries with little tombs of white plaster like classic temples the size of dog-houses. Here the dead were buried by the side of the road on a grim, silent plain invaded by cactus and brush. At times an abandoned roof on four poles told of the flight of its inhabitants from malignant miasmas. Everything that grew here had sharp edges, thorns, briars, evil saps. (108)

Carpentier’s despoiled earth is a crucial element in a meditation on Haitian history that has as its focal point the failure of the Revolution’s leaders to imagine a landscape without the plantation. If indeed, as Wynter’s work suggests, the slave leader’s natural role would be that of leading his or her people away from the structures of the plantation and into the “natural” order of the provision ground at the edge of a protective forest, then Carpentier’s text, resting as it does on Spenglerian notions of ever-repeating cycles of freedom and tyranny in history, leaves little hope that the land of Haiti can recover from the devastation of the plantation. His Mackandal, the *houngan* who called for battle in the name of the *lwa*, dies leaving the Revolution in the hands of leaders incapable of redressing the natural balance that would have returned the land to the people and

their gods. Boukman, who early in the novel had “stated that a pact had been sealed between the initiated on this side of the water and the great Loas of Africa to begin the war” (66), disappears from the text, dismissed in two lines that speak of how his corpse was left to rot and feed the crows. Toussaint never emerges from the shadows. The magnificent but weak Christophe is the only one to get his full due in the text, where he is depicted as a mimic man, striving to become an ersatz French aristocrat, a parody of a French king who has learned too well how exploitation and forced labor are the paths to power and glory. The Cristophe of *The Kingdom of This World* is a cardboard figure who denies his people the pleasures of the communal labor of the *coumbite* by returning them to the pre-Revolutionary patterns of forced labor they had experienced in the plantation.

It is in the treatment of Dessalines, however, that Carpentier’s hopelessness concerning the Haitian land and its people surfaces most startlingly. The one page dedicated to the most “uncompromisingly ferocious” of the leaders of the Revolution (Dayan 21) stresses his connection to the African gods,<sup>1</sup> but it fails to address the efforts he made to redefine land ownership in Haiti, a project that most probably led to his death (Dayan 26). Carpentier does not address either Dessalines’ “attempt to destroy ‘false property titles,’” or “the violence with which he tried to carry out what has been called ‘an impossible reform of the mentality of the ruling classes, and perhaps his own mentality’” (Dayan 27).

Dessalines’ efforts at legislating the redistribution of land were central to the project of restoration of the Haitian landscape to a harmonious balance with its people. His decrees sought both to validate the former slaves’ claim to property and to give them access to the land inhabited by their gods—an undertaking that was at once political, religious, and ecological. Carpentier’s text underscores the connection between Dessalines’ ferocity and adherence to the *lwa* but erases the other aspect of this communion with the gods—his role in trying to assure Haiti’s would-be peasantry access to a family plot of land, an *heritage*—that could serve as a foundation for a new society and offer a home for the familial *lwa*.

In Haitian literature, as in the country’s history, the environmental crossroads that the Revolution failed to negotiate successfully—and that has become since then the burden of the people, their *lwa*, and their *houngans*—has become a central leitmotif. This is hardly surprising, as the devastation brought upon the Haitian landscape by continued deforestation has become the country’s most glaring socioeconomic problem. As Haiti entered the twenty-first century, the country’s extreme deforestation, and the concomitant soil erosion, droughts, and disastrous flash floods, have

ravaged the countryside and led to its critical environmental condition. Haitian writers, understanding the centrality of the environmental situation, both as a historical reality and as a metaphor for addressing this history in literature, have made it a cornerstone of the development of the national novel. In Jacques Roumain’s *Masters of the Dew*, a seminal text in the development of the Haitian novel, the hero, Manuel, returns after years of working on the Cuban sugar plantations to the village of Fonds Rouge only to find it parched and dying from a drought caused by deforestation. Mired in a violent dispute over inheritance of the land, the villagers must come together if they are to find a solution to their ecological crisis. Led by their revered *lwa* Papa Ogoun, who counsels during a Vodou ceremony that the villagers must dig a canal to bring water from the still-forested mountains where “the vein is open, the blood flows,” Manuel realizes that a *coumbite*, a bringing together of labor of all the villagers, will be necessary to accomplish the task. Despite Manuel’s untimely death, the villagers unite and “a thin thread of water advanced, flowing through the plain, and the peasants went along with it, shouting and singing” (Roumain, *Masters* 190).

The importance of Haiti’s deforestation to the development of Caribbean literature in general can only be adumbrated here. In Marie Chauvet’s powerful meditation on Haiti’s history, *Amour, colère, et folie*, her clear-sighted narrator describes how the devastation caused by deforestation threatens the peasantry’s hold on that *heritage* that was Dessalines’ legacy:

It has been raining without check, and what is worse is that the rains came after the intensive clearing of the woods. Monsieur Long’s electric saw has been buzzing without interruption for the last fifteen days. A tree falls every five minutes. Yesterday, I took a long walk down the length of the coast to take a look at the damage. I saw huge trees falling to the ground, making the most awful noise, as if they were roaring before letting out their last breath . . . Avalanches of soil stream down the mountains, forming mounds below. There is no longer any coffee, except in our memories. Mr. Long is no longer interested in coffee. He now thinks of nothing but the export of lumber. When the lumber is gone, he’ll go after something else. Maybe he’ll start exporting men. He can have his pick from among the beggars and easily ship them out. (132; my translation)

Chauvet’s condemnation of the neocolonial (American) forces complicit in Haiti’s twentieth-century deforestation finds its way into her two most important novels. In *Amour*, she dissects the forces that led to the ecological revolution produced by deforestation as a factor in Haiti’s internal politics and international economic relationships. In *Fonds des nègres*, on

the other hand, she turns her gaze to the peasantry itself and its relationship to the land and to the *lwa* who inhabit it.

This relationship, as Joan Dayan has brilliantly analyzed in *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, is mediated by an *houngan*, Papa Beauville, who has himself been complicit in the deforestation of Haiti through selling his own land, bringing upon himself "the vengeance of the vodou gods" (Chauvet quoted in Dayan 93). His path to redemption—partly spearheaded by his efforts to bring a young newcomer from the city into the path of the gods—effortlessly weaves together religious (Papa Beauville), political (Facijs), gender (Marie-Ange), and environmental concerns in a progression toward the restoration of the land to the peasantry. As Dayan argues:

Though Marie-Ange wonders if such belief brings resignation, Facijs assures her that his struggle to help the poor people in the countryside to reclaim their land from the thieving urban bourgeois by forming a cooperative is not inconsistent with serving the gods. Far from weakening the will or inhibiting successful rebellion, vodou remains the necessary basis for political action. (92)

Haiti's environmental dilemma—in which history, ecology, religion, literature, and politics intersect—speaks eloquently to writers across the Caribbean. Haiti's symbolic position as the region's first republic and as a land whose history has been emblematic of the economic and political vicissitudes that have plagued other islands in the area gives the embattled nation a central position in Caribbean discourse. It's ecological conundrum, in the hands of Caribbean writers, becomes, as we have seen in Carpentier, the focal point for meditations on the region's environmental quandary, such as we find in Mayra Montero's 1995 novel, *Tú, la oscuridad* (*In the Palm of Darkness*).

*In the Palm of Darkness* is an avowedly environmentalist novel—the region's first. It narrates the tale of American herpetologist Victor Grigg, who, with the aid of his Haitian guide, the devoutly Vodouist Thierry Adrien, is on a quest for an elusive and threatened blood frog, extinct everywhere but on a dangerous, eerie mountain near Port-au-Prince. In the volatile and bloody setting of the Haitian mountains, controlled by violent thugs, Montero uncovers a haunted postcolonial space built upon the interstices between Grigg's scientific perspective and Adrien's animistic Vodou-inspired worldview. Montero uses this dichotomy to unveil how the extinction of species is the direct outcome of an environmental collapse as the forests that were the frogs' habitat disappear. She shows, concomitantly, how the troubled landscape of Haiti—and the very environment on which the Haitian people depend for survival—peopled with zombies

and other frightening, otherworldly creatures who have escaped the control of the *houngans*, has decayed precipitously due to political corruption, violence, institutional terror, murders, brutality, and religious turmoil.

Using the Vodou principle of an organic relationship between humans and the environment as a point of departure, Montero portrays the frustrating search for the elusive *Eleutherodactylis sanguineus* as a voyage to the center of a Caribbean darkness where corrupt neocolonial forces threaten the very environmental context that makes possible the religiosity of the Haitian people. In her exploration of the propagation and extinction of species in the natural world, paralleled by the narrative of how the mysterious forces of nature govern the fate of all living creatures, Montero extends the link between humanity's spiritual relation to the natural world to human vulnerability in environments that are pushing species to the verge of extinction. The possible existence of the last remaining specimens of the *Eleutherodactylis sanguineus* in Haiti's Mont des Enfants Perdus, the Mountain of Lost Children, points to the lost innocence that the despoiling of nature implies for Caribbean societies.

In her essay "The Great Bonanza of the Antilles," Mayra Montero writes of how she "suspected in some way, even at [an] early age, that there was a philosophy in the [Afro-Caribbean] cults of Ocha, Palo Monte, Vodou, and Espiritismo de Cordón that in one way or another expressed an integral conception of the world—a concept of man and of his organic relationship with the world" (Montero 197). In the magic-religious world of her texts—as in those of many Caribbean writers—the plot often revolves around fundamental ruptures in this relationship between nature and man, the healing of which becomes the task of the *houngan*, Obeah man, *santero*, or similar priestly figure.

In *Divine Horsemen*, Maya Deren identifies the protection of the parameters of the relationship between spirits and humans—the basis of Vodou as a religion—as the fundamental role of the *houngan* or *manbo*. As she explains, writing about the phenomenon of possession:

Thus the possessed benefits least of all from his own possession. He may even suffer from it in material loss, in the sometimes painful, always exhausted physical aftermath . . . But since the collective consists of ordinary men with a normal interest in their personal welfare, it is dependent upon its ability to induce in them a moment of extra-ordinary dedication if it is to have access to the revitalizing forces that flow from the center . . . In the growing control accomplished by the ordeals and instructions of initiation, and in the prospective vigilance of *houngan* and *société*, he is reassured that the personal price need

not be unpredictable or excessive. In the principle of collective participation is the guarantee that the burden shall, in turn, be distributed and shared. (276)

I cite Deren in some detail here because she articulates a fundamental notion of Haitian Vodou, and by extension of Santería, Obeah, and other creolized religious practices: the idea of the protective function served by the *houngan* as the one who controls the balance in the reciprocal relationship between the spirits and the humans who serve them. This protective relationship, in practice as well as in literature, is projected upon the land and its forests. In Erna Brodber's *Myal* (1988), for example, the devastating extent of the spirit thievery committed against Ella is externalized through a hurricane whose victims are catalogued primarily as trees: tens of thousands of coconut trees and breadfruit trees join the 1,522 fowls, 115 pigs, 116 goats, five donkeys, one cow, and one mule destroyed by the storm. Mass Cyrus, the *Myal* man whose healing of Ella has unleashed the rage of this storm on the unsuspecting landscape, can only excuse his act by trusting in the regenerative power of nature and pleading his need to protect his grove—his right to protect “his world,” which contains his healing plants and trees—against destructive forces brought “from foreign.”

Mass Cyrus's faith in the regenerative power of nature reflects Brodber's experience with the seemingly never-ending capacity of the Caribbean's tropical vegetation to renew itself if given half a chance. It provides a stance—simultaneously ecological and political—that provides a context for the representation of the *houngan*, *santero*, *quimboiseur*, or Obeah man as a figure that has sought to reconcile the tumult, violence, and destabilization of Caribbean historical experience with the balance, struggle for survival, and the physical and mental health that emerge out of the living contact with the spiritual forces that accompanied African slaves on their Atlantic Passage. The endurance of Loco—“he of the trees,” as Maya Deren calls him—exemplifies the indispensable protection of the environment needed to guarantee the survival of principles and practices vital to the continuity of Caribbean cultures.

As the writers discussed in this study—from the anonymous author of *Hamel* to Brodber—make clear, however, the question of environmental preservation in the contemporary Caribbean is ultimately, as it has been since Dessalines failed in his efforts at radically altering patterns of land ownership in Haiti, a political one. The Creole religions of the Caribbean may articulate the environmental tenets of their belief systems—and writers may echo them—in vain until these notions enter the realm of political discourse and lead to concerted conservationist action. Recent events in

Haiti and the Dominican Republic have demonstrated the tragic complexity of the region's ecological quandary.

On 24 May 2004, the Haitian village of Mapou—named after a tree sacred in Vodou practices—was washed away by a deadly torrent produced by two weeks of continued heavy rains. Sweeping through Mapou and other villages and hamlets clinging to the deforested hills near the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic—among them Fond Verrettes and Jimaní—the floods and mudslides left around three thousand people dead in their wake. More than eleven thousand families were displaced when their homes and shanties were buried under the rushing walls of mud (Weiner and Polgreen). Crops were destroyed, goats and pigs drowned, the water wells contaminated by decomposing bodies, and the villages isolated by the destruction of the roads. Epidemics were expected.

While roughly five feet of rain fell Sunday and Monday, the water ran down land denuded of trees, over thin soil eroded by decades of slash-and-burn farming. The rain filled rivulets and rivers, running so hard down the steep and treeless slopes, until the raging muddy waters reached the valley that sheltered Mapou and engulfed it. (Weiner, “Floods”)

The trees, newspapers around the world reported, had been cut for charcoal in a country that relies on wood for cooking and other activities. The rich topsoil had long since been washed to sea. In Guadalajara for a political summit of European and Latin American leaders, Haitian prime minister Gerard Latortue echoed the international concerns over the connection between the deadly flash floods and his country's massive deforestation: “The deep cause of this situation is the deforestation of Haiti. We have lost more than 80 percent of forest because people like to use wood charcoal as a source of energy” (“Haiti's Deforestation”).

“Like to use wood charcoal as a source of energy” is perhaps not the most accurate way of describing a situation in which most of Haiti's 8 million people depend on charcoal to cook because there is no electricity, gas, or kerosene outside major cities and towns. It is a stance that blames a desperate population that has endured two centuries of political corruption, mismanagement, and greed for a process that began long before they found their deaths in the choking mud. “Most people here work the earth, but the most desperate take the trees to make charcoal, which sells for a few pennies a pound at market,” Fernando Gueren, a surviving farmer from Mapou, told a *New York Times* reporter. “When they take the trees, there's nothing left to drink up the water. They wreck the land to survive” (Weiner, “Floods”).

After the recent floods, however, even the trees are gone from Mapou: First villagers chopped down hardwoods like mahogany and cherry. Then they went after mango and avocado trees, destroying a food source. The sprawling mapou trees were cut as a last resort. Followers of voodoo, Haiti's official religion, believe the trees are repositories of a pantheon of spirits and hold ceremonies and sacrifices in their shade. And mapous usually indicate the presence of spring water. In some dry patches of the country, only legends of the mapou remain. (Dodds 11)

"My grandmother used to tell me stories about the mapou trees and how they should always be respected for the power that they had with the spirits," Dereston Jean-Louise, a Mapou survivor, told Paisley Dodds, a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times*, "but that was a different time. People are poorer now and a lot of us don't have choices" (11). They also don't have the help and comfort of their *houngan*, who was among the hundreds buried under the mud. He and his *ounfort*, or temple, made from scrap wood collected from the felled trees nearby, had been swept away by the waters. With them, it seemed, went all remaining faith and hope. "My family's all dead," said Pedro Nisson, a young traditional healer who had watched his family drown. "When the rains came, the people tried to flee to the hills, but the water drove them back. It's impossible to see how we will make it through the days to come" (Weiner. "Floods").

The Haitian government, bankrupt and overwhelmed, had few solutions to offer. "We can't go on like this," Prime Minister LaTortue told reporters in Guadalajara. "When I return I have plans to speak with the government to invite students in a re-forestation project" ("Haiti's Deforestation"). He vowed to "create a forest protection unit made up of former soldiers of the demobilized Haitian Army" (Weiner and Polgreen).

No Haitian leader, however, has ever visited Mapou. "For the poor, there is no government," said Lilie Jean-Baptiste, a survivor of the floods in Mapou who used to eke out a living growing cassava and now feels that the "land is cursed": "The only government of Haiti is God" (Weiner, "Haitian Village"). Without a concerted government-led effort, the Haitian people may have to trust to God and their *lwa*.

#### Note

1. His victory was "the result of a vast coalition entered in by Loco, Petro, Ogoun Ferraille, Brise-Pimba, Caplaou-Pimba, Marinette Bois-Chèche, and all the deities of powder and fire" (Carpentier 109).

## PART 4

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### Aesthetics of the Earth